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CHURCH COUNCILS AND THE NATURE OF THEIR DECISIONS.

The action of our late Annual Council in regard to the mandatory character of its decisions does not seem to be fully understood by some, and hence it has given rise to certain questions as to what may be the tendency of the workings of said action. To some it would seem to appear that the mandatory character of the decisions of our Annual Meeting is something altogether new. But the mandatory or binding character of the decisions of our Annual Meeting is not altogether new, since some of those decisions have always been considered mandatory, while others have been considered only advisory. In the Minutes of 1865, Act 34, we have the following: "Does the Annual Council make laws, or give advice only in cases where it has no direct gospel on the subject?" Answer: "It gives advice only. This answer we think might with propriety have been somewhat modified. It seems to be proper that we should sometimes make decisions of A. M. mandatory when we have no "thus saith the Lord," in so many words on the subject; as in the case of performing certain military services under our civil government. War is not only contrary to the spirit of the gospel, but Christians are plainly prohibited by the word of the gospel from engaging in war. But there are certain services connected with the military affairs of our government, which the people living under our government are required to take part in or pay their fine if they do not

Of this character is military drill. We have had brethren among us who have accepted our doctrine of non resistance, but who have tried to justify themselves in the performance of the service of the military muster and drill required by the government, because by giving the service a few hours, they could save their fine, and yet not engage in actual war.

Now as the relation of the military service of ministering to war is such that the church could not but regard the brethren's taking part in the mustering service as a compromising of our non-resistant principles, it was therefore found necessary for the A. M. to pass the following decision: "How it is considered when brethren go to muster and drill. Considered that it is contrary to our baptismal vow, contrary to the word of God, and contrary to the professed principle of the church, and can by no means be permitted or tolerated." Minutes of 1835, Art. 7. Here a decision restraining brethren from engaging in muster service is made mandatory, though that decision is based upon a plain logical inference from gospel premises, though not upon direct "thus saith the Lord."

In the Minutes of 1828, Art. 1, we have the following: "Whether a brother can belong to the Freemasons and still be a brother (in the church)? Considered, that it cannot be." Here, as in the other case referred to, we have no "thus saith the Lord," in these very words, for not fellowshipping a brother who is a Freemason, but we are all well satisfied that the church, in looking at Freemasonry from gospel principles, was justified, and from fidelity

to Christ was required to make the mandatory decision it did in regard to a brother who is a Freemason.

The church of Christ then, in all ages of the world, in applying the gospel discipline, is justified in maintaining its purity, and bearing its testimony against the different developments of evil, to make some of its decisions mandatory. So has our Brotherhood, through the A. M. done, and so did the ancient church. In the collection of decisions of the ancient church embodied in what are called the *Apostolical Constitutions*, we have decisions of various characters; some are admonitory, some exhortatory, some advisory, and some mandatory. According to the nature of the crime they were to avoid, and the character of the duty they were to perform, were the decisions made by the ancient Councils of the Church.

Many of the decisions of our Brotherhood were regarded, as we have already seen, as advisory. They were so regarded by our aged brethren because it was hoped that the wisdom embodied in our Annual Council, and expressed in the decisions thereof, would be respected by the brethren generally, and so judiciously used by them, as to make the experience and wisdom of the councilors of the church helpful in avoiding evil and in doing good. It was hoped that the decisions of A. M. need not bear a mandatory character to commend them to a judicious observance by the church. And such was the case to a very considerable degree in former years, when brotherly love prevailed, and confidence in one another was felt. Some of us to-day thank God for the counselors we had in our ancient brethren, and for the counsels that they gave us. We feel that they were great helps to us, under God, in making us what we are, so far as we have attained to anything that is good. And we sincerely regret that many of the counsels of our ancient brethren, coming to us through the official records of the church, as well as through other sources, are not more respected by many of us, as we verily believe we might profit by them.

But the decisions of our A. M. have ceased

in a great measure to be regarded with any considerable degree of respect by many, and they have been spoken of in an unbrotherly manner even by brethren, and as a consequence, a strong prejudice has been awakened against them. And there has been for some time, in different localities, a growing indifference to the discipline and order of the Church.

And this indifference has been manifested in both the official and lay members of the Church. And there has been, to the great grief of many hearts, a clear manifestation of the want, on the part of too many, of an attachment, devotion, and love to the church, our spiritual home, and ark of safety.

Under such a state of things, some of our brethren have thought that something more stringent in the discipline of the church is desirable. And with the hope that it might add to the improvement of the general Brotherhood, the mandatory decision of our late A. M. was brought forward and passed. And as we are all very anxious for an improvement in our spiritual character and enjoyment in our church capacity, as well as in our individual capacity, let us all desire and pray that the decision referred to may, by a judicious application of it, prove a help to the Brotherhood as it was designed to be.

We think that those who have had some doubts of the propriety of making the decisions of A. M. mandatory, need entertain no serious fears of any evil consequences growing out of the adoption of the rule. There will be strong guards around it. First, it will require two-thirds of the delegated power constituting the Annual Council to pass a decision. Secondly, it should, and we trust it will, be ever borne in mind by all on whom the responsible work devolves of passing decisions at A. M., that they ought to be extremely cautious to pass no decision, the violation of which may lead to the separation of members from the church, unless such decision is plainly sustained by the gospel of Christ. To expel a member from the church of Christ, which is said to be his body, is a great, a solemn, and a most responsible work. The Church is said to be the body of Christ.

To separate a member from the body, when there is a vital connection with the body, and there is such a connection when there is no sufficient cause for the separation, is a great affliction to the body, and to the member separated as well. So while we are to put away the wicked from the church, 1 Cor. 5: 13, we are to be cautious that while we remove the tares we do not "root up also the wheat with them." Matt. 13: 29. Hence the great responsibility resting on the church in making rules or decisions that are man latory. Their effects reach into eternity, and influence souls that are of more value than worlds.

J. Q.

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EDITORS } ELD. JAMES QUINTER,
AND } H. B. BRUMBAUGH,
PROPRIETORS: } J. B. BRUMBAUGH.

FURTHER REMARKS ON CHURCH COUNCILS AND THEIR DECISIONS.

The progressive brethren who do not look with favor upon our late Annual Meeting are indulging pretty freely in their censures of the meeting because of the action taken making its decisions mandatory or binding. The censure passed and remarks made upon the action of A. M. referred to, are calculated to awaken prejudices against the A. M., and especially against the decision referred to. Hence we feel the importance of having the subject presented in its proper light, and would offer some farther remarks to so present it.

That the decisions made by all bodies partaking of the nature of our Annual Meeting are to some extent mandatory, will be, we presume, readily acknowledged. That they are only advisory, is not the prevailing view of the character of the decisions of such bodies, though some of the decisions may be only of an advisory character. That some of the decisions of our A. M. have always been understood to be binding, is well-known, and as we showed in our former article. We also referred to the decisions of the early councils of the church, as they are contained in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, as being mandatory as well as admonitory and advisory. We will give a few decisions which were mandatory. The following are found in the eighth Book of the *Constitutions*. The 44th canon reads thus: "If any one of the clergy be taken eating in a tavern, let him be suspended; excepting when, by necessity, he stoppeth at an inn upon the road." The 60th canon is as follows: "If any one publicly read in the church the spurious books of the ungodly, as if they were holy, to the destruction of the people and of the clergy, let him be deposed." The 76th is as follows: "A Bishop must not, by human affection, confer favors on a brother, or a son, or other kinsman; for we must not put the church of God under the laws of inheritance; but if one shall do this, let the ordination be invalid, and let him be punished with suspension."

By referring to the decisions and rules of church councils of different ages of the church, and of different bodies of professing Christians, for the discipline and government of the body for which they are designed, it will be found that a mandatory or binding character is generally given to them. Such is commonly understood to be the character of such rules. As an example, we give a rule of the Methodist Episcopal church. The following will be found on the 85th page of the Discipline:

"Quest. 5. What shall we do with those members of our church who wilfully and repeatedly neglect to meet their class?"

"Ans. 1. Let the elder, deacon, or one of the preachers, visit them, whenever it is practicable, and explain to them the consequence if they continue to neglect," viz, exclusion.

"2 If they do not amend, let him who has the charge of the circuit or station bring their case before the society, or a select number, before whom they shall have been cited to appear; and if they be found guilty of wilful neglect by the decision of a majority of the members, before whom their case is brought, let them be laid aside, and let the preacher show that they are excluded for a breach of our rules, and not for immoral conduct." Here we notice that the rule of the Methodist Episcopal church, concerning class meeting, is mandatory, and that the penalty for the violation of it is expulsion from the church. Now, we do not approve of the rule of the Methodist church in the case referred to, but we allude to it to show that the mandatory character of church rules and decisions is not so offensive to people generally, or so contrary to their judgment, as some would have us to believe. All churches and all organizations have more or less of mandatory or binding rules.

The objection then to the mandatory decisions of A. M. cannot justly be rendered against them when they are right, but only against rules that are not right when they are made mandatory. And here lies the danger, and to this must the watchful care of all the churches be directed, that no rules or decisions be passed and made mandatory that are not according to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And especially must great caution be exercised in making rules and decisions in regard to matters that the Scriptures are not plain upon neither in their verbal teaching, nor by plain implication.

J. Q.